



STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF THE IRAQ INSURGENCY

By James A. Russell*

The stakes for the United States in the Iraq insurgency have grown since the end of major combat operations was declared more than a year ago, and it becomes steadily more difficult to maintain that it is fighting a few disaffected criminals, former regime loyalists and terrorists. While each of these groups may be included in the various insurgent groups, the United States is now dealing with an insurgency that appears entrenched and increasingly well organized amidst what is an at best ambivalent population that likes the fact that Saddam is gone but also now increasingly views the United States as an occupying force and wants it gone. The United States now faces a daunting task in trying to regain the strategic initiative--indeed it may be impossible at this point. But as a critical first step, planners must come to a realistic appraisal of the nature of the security environment inside Iraq at the tactical, operational and strategic levels. After this appraisal, policy and military options can be realistically evaluated and measured in the context of available resources.

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The insurgency is one of several interrelated factors that have combined to force policy makers and operational commanders into a series of tactical decisions which might make sense in responding to events on the ground but which inevitably also speak to the fact that the United States has lost the strategic

initiative in Iraq. Errors in prewar planning on sizing and configuring the invasion force, along with the misguided planning for the supposed "post-conflict" environment, have left the United States in a largely reactive mode.

The United States faces a daunting task in trying to regain the strategic initiative--indeed it may be impossible at this point. But as a critical first step, planners must come to a realistic appraisal of the nature of the security environment inside Iraq at the tactical, operational and strategic levels. After this appraisal, policy and military options can be realistically evaluated and measured in the context of available resources.

THE IMAGERY OF CONFLICT

At the outset, the United States must address the impact of global communications and media images on public perceptions of the conflict not just in Iraq but also throughout the region and

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE JUN 2004		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2004 to 00-00-2004	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Strategic Implications of the Iraq Insurgency				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Naval Postgraduate School,Center for Contemporary Conflict,1 University Circle,Monterey,CA,93943				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 8	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

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around the world. One feature of warfare in the modern era is the strategic significance of the imagery of conflict. These images constitute powerful forces shaping nearly instantaneous public perceptions at home and abroad. In Vietnam, it was not until the United States had been on the ground for seven years that images of the conflict began to contribute to a public perception that undermined widespread support for the war. In today's world of the global super information highway, governments--including the United States--have lost the luxury of conducting operations in far-flung parts of the globe with limited media and public exposure to the conduct of the conflict.

The grotesque and demeaning images of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison are only the latest in a series of images that feed negative public perceptions of the Iraq conflict around the world. Inside Iraq, the powerful images of former Iraqi military officers in their old uniforms policing the streets of Fallujah makes moot any tactical victory the United States might have achieved by not having to assault its entrenched insurgents. Those images chill the ardor of Iraqis inclined to support U.S. efforts, while possibly also escalating ethnic and religious conflict inside Iraq.

The collective force of these images represents a "strategic" dimension of the conflict that is not well understood in Washington. The insurgency itself, public reaction elsewhere, and the policies of many governments all interact to reduce support for U.S. efforts in Iraq and elsewhere.

THE IRAQ PLAN

In assessing the impact of the insurgency on U.S. objectives, it is useful to review the strategic assumptions that led to the war and use them as a benchmark to think through the broader implications of the insurgency. The architects behind the Iraq war in the Bush Administration had a

clear idea of the strategic objectives of invading Iraq and toppling Saddam Hussein. The first assumptive building block at the strategic level was that getting rid of Saddam was the key to stability throughout the region both "defensively"--removing a threat--and "offensively"--to expand the zone of democracy throughout the region. Removing the threat would allow the reintegration of Iraq--a potentially powerful economic and political force -- into the global, rules-based international order.

The Clinton Administration had believed that Saddam could be contained more or less indefinitely through the forward military presence in the Gulf and political and economic isolation enforced through bare-knuckles politics in the Security Council. As the Iraq desk officer in the Office of the Secretary of Defense from 1996 to 1998, I remember one particularly poignant moment when then Assistant Secretary David Welch was asked how long we could keep up the "pressure" in the UN to maintain the sanctions regime. His response went something like "as long as we have to; indefinitely if necessary."

The Bush Administration arrived in Washington in 2001 with the idea that preservation of the status quo on Iraq was unacceptable. Its idea was that a democratic Iraq would serve as a beacon for political reform and democracy in a region that had for the most part been neglected during the 1990s on the issue of political reform. The argument was that a new political order in Baghdad would spur the spread of reform around the region and that the new emerging leadership would, in turn, be more willing to maintain peace, cooperate with the United States, resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, and improve the lives of their people in a way that would reduce terrorism. The invasion and removal of Saddam thus was seen as a "win-win" situation on all fronts.

But other objectives were also in play with the removal of Saddam Hussein. A democratic and stable Iraq, it was argued, might even become the "epicenter" for a new overarching regional security strategy in which a reconfigured system of regional security would see the U.S. forward presence moved from Saudi Arabia and redistributed in Iraq and elsewhere, to places like al-Udeid in Qatar. With a reduced U.S. forward presence spread out more widely in a lower profile, it would be freed from the need to defend the region and the decade-long mission of operationalizing containment of Iraq.

Instead, the forward deployed force would be better able to address truly strategic requirements in the nation's new security strategy, which, among other things, calls for a reconfiguration of forward deployed forces around the world to better address emerging threats in the global war on terrorism in the so-called "arc of instability." The forward deployed presence in the Gulf and the Middle East assumes a central role in addressing military contingencies within this arc, in the Horn of Africa, the Maghreb, the Caucasus and the Central Asian Republics as well as South Asia-Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Also framing these issues, particularly after the September 11 attacks, was the perceived erosion of the U.S. deterrent posture that resulted from the incremental use of force in Iraq and elsewhere around the world during the 1990s. The Bush Administration believed that the eroded deterrent had only emboldened emerging new adversaries like al-Qa'ida and drawn into question U.S. credibility in addressing threats in the new global security environment symbolized by the September 11 attacks. Instead, so the argument went, the United States needed to use force decisively and overwhelmingly to defeat their immediate adversaries and to

convince potential new ones of the futility of taking up arms against the United States. The concept of "dissuasion" of peer competitors and adversaries is in fact a cornerstone of the Bush Administration's national security strategy.

THE INSURGENCY AND "THE PLAN"

These same stakes are at play in a negative sense in the insurgency, which has the potential to force the United States into a largely reactive strategic posture in the region that will have ripple effects around the world. How can this problem be managed?

A critical first problem to overcome is the language and rhetoric being used to describe the insurgency. The insurgency represents an obstacle to the achievement of U.S. overall strategic objectives and needs to be framed in this context. The rhetorical flourishes from both sides of the political spectrum cloud and obscure the issues at play and prevent a reasoned analysis of available choices given available resources.

In this context, it has become increasingly unclear what is meant by "winning" and "losing." What exactly does "stay the course" mean? What does "defeat is not an option" mean? What does "we can't cut and run" really mean? For that matter, how do we define "victory"?

If winning means a peaceful and secure and democratic Iraq in six months, at this point, this objective seems unattainable. Alternatively, does winning mean reducing the level of violence and keeping it confined to the areas of active insurgency, which are still a relatively small part of the country? Is there even such a thing as a "military" victory? If a military victory is defined as an eradication of the insurgency, such an objective also seems unattainable in the short term.

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As has been obvious from the outset, there are insufficient forces on the ground in Iraq. But it is not clear how many more troops would be needed if they were available or even if there could be a military solution to the insurgency. The "how much is enough" question returns us to some of the same debates that bedeviled military planners during the Vietnam War. To outside observers, it looks as if the force now on the ground is only sufficient to guard enclaves, protect convoys and perform other force protection missions that drain the resources of the force that might be better spent providing more widespread local security. Local security, it should be remembered, is the means to the end – to create an environment where a political process can start to unfold that will lead to legitimacy and some form of self-governance.

But it also seems obvious that the United States does not have the forces available to commit the kinds of numbers needed to provide effective local security throughout Iraq. Increasing troop levels in Iraq forces difficult choices. Additional troops can only be found by withdrawing them from Korea or Bosnia/Kosovo or delaying rotations. All or parts of 9 of the Army's 10 active divisions are either in Iraq or Afghanistan. The inescapable conclusion is that a "military" solution to the insurgency might well require a national-level mobilization, the call-up of more reserves, and even, conceivably, reinstitution of the draft. These are drastic steps, but ones that should be on the drawing board to realistically assess the costs of isolating the insurgency and providing better and more widespread local security.

A related issue to address is the mix of capabilities needed. Commentators note that Iraq is primarily a political problem, meaning that the central challenge facing the United States in Iraq is not management of the insurgency but fashioning a system

of government that is seen by Iraqis as legitimate. If that is the case, military forces should be assigned a secondary role, though it is not exactly clear what instruments are available to the United States to foster such a political process, particularly when the security environment appears to be in such a precarious state.

OPERATIONAL ISSUES

On the tactical level, there are also serious problems and issues confronting operational commanders. At one level, all the Iraqi insurgents have to do is avoid "losing" and continue to chip away at U.S. forces--inflicting casualties and using asymmetric tactics in what is a very difficult operational environment for U.S. forces. The insurgents seem to have the strategic initiative at this point and can pick targets of opportunity at their leisure--reconstruction activities, aid projects, and local police stations, for example. Time is on their side. Both sides know that the United States cannot stay forever, and has in fact established a series of largely arbitrary deadlines that intimate the United States may leave Iraq possibly as early as 2005. At one level, the existence of a resistance at all is seen as a victory throughout the Arab world and a sign of successful conflict with the seemingly omnipotent United States.

Age-old rules of warfare--rules the United States has tried to rewrite over the last decade--are returning. Billions of dollars have been spent on the revolution in military affairs around the idea of "effects based operations." This term is defined by the Joint Forces Command as: "A process for obtaining a desired strategic outcome...through the synergistic, multiplicative, and cumulative application of the full range of military and nonmilitary capabilities at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels." Whatever this means in plain English, it does not apply to the environment being defined by the

insurgents. There are still casualties being inflicted by an enemy that has no shortage of weapons and a stream of recruits from outside and inside the country to continue their attacks.

Another concept trumpeted as part of network-centric warfare is "information superiority in the battle space" that flows from operational picture technologies created as part of the global command and control system. These technologies, it is argued, create situational awareness in the area of conflict that can eliminate, or severely reduce, the so-called "fog of war." But it seems clear that the insurgents are making a strong effort to challenge the U.S.'s information superiority and may even have successfully countered U.S. technological advantages. The side with low-tech items such as cell phones and walkie-talkies--even flag signaling--seems to have better battlefield intelligence and situational awareness in the active areas.

For planners trying to think through the implications of moving to a capabilities-based defense planning system, the situation in Iraq reopens wounds first inflicted within the U.S. defense-planning establishment during the 1990s. During this period, the military found itself engaged in high operational tempo missions around the world that became known as military operations other than war, or MOOTW. Three of the highest MOOTW missions in fact addressed Iraq--Operations Southern-and Northern Watch and the Maritime Interception Operations. The Air Force in particular bitterly complained about the burden of executing what it regarded as the pointless and seemingly never-ending missions over Iraq.

The broader problem with MOOTW was that they consumed large amounts of cash, burned through equipment and strained the force due to the constant overseas deployments. Military planners frankly wished that MOOTW would go

away, and constantly complained to Congress and anyone else that would listen about the debilitating impact these operations were having on the force. But as MOOTW continued to rear its ugly head in the 1990s, the Clinton Administration was disinclined to encourage the military to start reprogramming procurement and training programs to better address MOOTW scenarios. Instead, the military was permitted to continue buying expensive platforms to prepare for symmetrical conflict against sophisticated and well-armed opponents. The Bush Administration, however, came into office signaling that MOOTW would come to an end during its tenure. But as the Iraq insurgency shows, forward deployed forces around the world must be prepared to deal with a wide variety of combat and non-combat contingencies, and it is unlikely that this requirement will go away anytime soon.

IMPACT ON REGIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

The long-term impact of the insurgency on regional strategy is of course uncertain. The longer the insurgency, the more difficult it becomes to get down to the business of determining the size, location and configuration of the forward deployed presence and the missions that forces will be engaged in, be they related to missions directly in theater as part of the global war on terrorism or as part of the emerging global strike requirement. An ongoing insurgency means that missions for these forces will for the most part have to do with what are euphemistically called "stability operations."

What this means in the short term is that the regional security environment becomes not more benign, as was the hope, but more dangerous, suggesting that more forces will have to be deployed into the region, not just in Iraq but in the supporting

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components in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Moreover, this does not address additional military requirements for Afghanistan, which, while smaller, also represents a significant drain on the forward deployed global posture.

The United States operates on the assumption that the supporting components in this "system"--the facilities provided in the Gulf States--will be available more or less indefinitely, which may or may not be true. Al-Udeid in Qatar and al-Dhafra in the UAE have emerged as critical forward nodes for theater-wide operations, including Iraq. The concrete footprint being developed at these facilities suggest a long-term stay and imply a commitment by ruling elites to put up with any domestic dissatisfaction that may flow from the U.S. military presence.

IMPACT ON DETERRENCE

The impact of the insurgency on the U.S. deterrent posture is a double-edged sword. The United States used force decisively to great effect during the conventional military phase of the operation. All of the hundreds of billions of dollars lavished on the force over the last decade were on display for the world to see--integrated ground, air and sea operations working together in joint task forces--albeit against an incompetent opponent. It is hard to argue that potential adversaries weren't impressed by the military's performance during Operation Iraqi Freedom. It's difficult to see any adversary on the horizon today that could successfully confront the United States in a symmetrical conflict.

At the same time, though, the applicability of this new way of operating in environments like the Iraq insurgency is uncertain. While not being "defeated" in the strict military sense, the imagery of the conflict reinforces the idea that the United States is on the defensive and appears ill

prepared to deal with a very difficult operating environment characterized by cultural dissimilarity, language barriers, an urban landscape that lends itself to denial and deception techniques, a virtually endless supply of equipment and munitions for the insurgents and last, but not least, a steady stream of recruits that will always outnumber an ability to neutralize them in a strict military sense.

So, on the one hand, the U.S. deterrent posture is strengthened in terms of the conventional phase of combat operations but is apparently being weakened in the low-intensity spectrum of the conflict environment. How this is perceived around the world cannot be empirically demonstrated, but it's a good guess that adversaries are playing close attention to the tactics, techniques and procedures being used by the insurgents and are taking copious notes.

THE SITUATION AND ITS ALTERNATIVES

The U.S. ability to introduce a legitimate, functioning democracy in the short term seems impossible and this fact should be acknowledged. Meanwhile, any ability to create a security environment in which an Iraqi regime could rule the country hangs in the balance. By losing the strategic initiative, the United States also has less chance to bring regime change in Iraq to a successful conclusion as a positive force for regional political and economic reform. The insurgency also makes it harder to introduce programs like the Middle East Partnership Initiative or Greater Middle East Initiative. Anti-Americanism, now also being fed by the insurgency, means that most governments reflexively recoil from U.S. initiatives and suggestions. Moreover, by requiring more help from Gulf Arab states to support a U.S. forward deployed presence reduces any incentive to push for democracy and transparency.

At the operational level, it seems unclear what impact the Iraq insurgency will have in the surrounding Gulf States or even in the wider region. The Iraq insurgency has become a radicalizing rallying cry that, like the daily vitriol served up in the regional press on the Arab-Israeli dispute, becomes a convenient distraction for the regimes in confronting their own problems. But by helping radicalize the public, the insurgency also shrinks the regimes' abilities or interests in enacting reforms, steps they are already ambivalent about taking.

In terms of broader U.S. strategic decisionmaking, the military requirements of conducting sustained operations against an increasingly well-organized insurgency delays the ability to transform the forward deployed presence around the world to better conform to this "arc of instability" that Pentagon planners are worrying about. The insurgency also highlights important and unanswered questions about the conduct of contemporary warfare already being debated throughout the U.S. military. How are the armed forces supposed to use transformation-type technologies, especially where cultural barriers perhaps constitute the most difficult hurdle in conducting successful combat operations? Moreover, new technologies have not solved the structural shortfalls of disproportionate resources being tied up in logistics and support as opposed to direct combat capability. The new technologies only increase the logistical footprint necessary to support the operational force in distant theaters.

More broadly, Pentagon planners need to be thinking about the whole issue of where the Iraq conflict fits within its expectations for those situations requiring the use of force. Press reports indicate that the Pentagon wants to set up an office analyzing the conduct of future wars. Deciding how representative the conflict in

Iraq is should be the first task for such an office. The implications of an affirmative answer are ominous--suggesting a continuing need to combat protracted insurgencies in urban terrain in culturally dissimilar parts of the world. Fighting these kinds of wars require more, not less, manpower and the role of expensive new technologies is still being defined and may frankly be limited.

REGAINING THE STRATEGIC INITIATIVE

At this point, it is unclear whether the U.S. position in Iraq is salvageable in any meaningful way. But in order to try and regain the initiative, a number of elementary steps suggest themselves.

First, there must be an open and honest discussion about the nature of the problem represented by the insurgency. There are a wide variety of insurgent groups, some of which have competing interests and objectives. The Iraq insurgency is a complex phenomenon, and its complexities must be identified and addressed.

Second, the forces of many different elements of the U.S. government must be integrated into a planning and execution mechanism that will focus analytical and material support for the Central Command and the Coalition Provisional Authority. Strong leadership is also needed to reintroduce some semblance of discipline and order into the clearly dysfunctional interagency process in Washington that is adversely affecting efforts inside Iraq.

Third, there needs to be a reasoned assessment of the military and non-military resources available to combat the insurgency. If more troops are needed or a different mix of on-the-ground capabilities is needed, then these capabilities should be introduced as soon as practicable.

Fourth, as part of a strategy to address the imagery of the conflict, Iraqis need to

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be given visible responsibility for the fate of their country.

Fifth, the United States should arrive at some understanding of what are its minimum acceptable outcomes in Iraq. Is the goal merely to ensure there are no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and no Iranian-style radical Islamist regime there? Or is it a more ambitious aim of a more moderate, stable, and representative government? In this context, it must be understood that the United States will have little influence on such matters once elections are held in early 2005.

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